

**THE CITIZEN SURVEY: MEASURING CUSTOMER
SATISFACTION AND IDENTIFY FUTURE PROGRAMS
FOR THE FIRE DEPARTMENT OF LINCOLNWOOD, ILLINOIS**

**ADVANCED LEADERSHIP ISSUES
IN
EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES**

**BY: Michael C. Hansen
Fire Chief
Lincolnwood Fire Department
Lincolnwood, IL**

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ABSTRACT

For years fire departments have taken the position that fire and emergency services are a critical governmental function and customer feed-back in the form of a citizen survey wasn't necessary. The Lincolnwood Fire Department wasn't any different in their thinking process. To date there was no evaluation tool used by the department to determine the citizens' satisfaction levels for the services that the department provides. The purpose of this research project was to develop a citizen survey and use it to evaluate the department's existing services as well as determining the need for any future programs. A descriptive research methodology was used in this research study. The research questions were:

1. Determine to what extent citizen surveys are used in the fire service and of what value these surveys may be.
2. Determine if the Lincolnwood Fire Department does an effective job of communicating to the residents what existing services are available.
3. Determine the satisfaction levels of the citizens of Lincolnwood with the services provided by their fire department.
4. Evaluate what future programs the residents of Lincolnwood would like to see developed by their fire department.

A two page, seven question survey was developed and distributed to 500 homes that were randomly chosen from water bill mailing lists. A postage paid return envelope was enclosed and 223 surveys were returned (45.2%) and tabulated.

Ninety residents indicated they had used the fire department's services during the last five years with 97.8% of the respondents indicating they were "extremely to very satisfied" with the services. Our smoke detector sales and installation program (57.8%) was the highest recognized program followed by CPR & First Aid Classes (50%) and the fire survival house (49.8%). The citizens rated the quality of fire services

provided as “excellent to good” (95.1%). Future services the citizens requested implementing were a home fire inspection program (47.8%) and a flu shot program (33.6%).

Based on the survey’s results, I would recommend the following:

- Develop communication accesses with the citizens to educate them about existing programs that are currently in place. Some of these avenues of communication may include developing local access cable programs, newsletters to the citizens, and community networking with school PTA, Seniors Club, etc.
- Develop tools for continued monitoring of satisfaction levels of citizens with existing services. These tools could include course evaluations handed out at the completion of our programs, monthly sampling by phone or card of citizens or business owners who used our service during that month, and continued yearly surveys to measure results against the baseline survey.
- Develop business plans for the possible implementation of a community flu shot program and home inspection program.
- Continue to monitor the ideas of citizens for future programs through the use of citizen surveys. Evaluate the need and practicality of implementing future programs suggested by citizens.

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INTRODUCTION

For years fire departments have taken the position that fire and emergency services are a critical governmental function and customer feed-back in the form of a citizen surveys wasn't necessary. The Lincolnwood Fire department wasn't any different. We have relied on our "good guy" reputation to gather community support for our programs and budgetary expenditures. The thank you letters and donations that the department received were viewed by the firefighters as proof that the citizens were happy with the department's performance.

To date there is no evaluation tool used by the Lincolnwood Fire Department to determine the citizens' satisfaction levels for the services that the department provides. The purpose of this research project is to develop a citizen survey and use it to evaluate the department's existing services as well as determining the need for any future programs.

A descriptive research methodology is used in this research study. The research questions are:

1. Determine to what extent citizen surveys are used in the fire service and of what value these surveys may be.
2. Determine if the Lincolnwood Fire Department does an effective job of communicating to the residents what existing services are available.
3. Determine the satisfaction levels of the citizens of Lincolnwood with the services provided by their fire department.
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BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The stability of the fire department within the community depends on the willingness of its citizens to support the department through tax revenues. Citizens are becoming increasingly distrustful of local governments and as a result taxpayer discontent has led to:

- Increased number of revenue-limiting initiatives
- Failed bond issues
- Complaints to the city or village elected officials
- Objections to higher salaries for public employees (Goldzimer, 1989)

These measures taken by citizens not only affect the fire service but also impacts school, library, and park boards.

Within local governments, the fire department is competing with police and public works for diminishing budget dollars. To remain competitive for these budget dollars, fire administrators need to identify what services the citizens need and evaluate the citizens' satisfaction with the current quality of service provided. Developing a knowledge of community needs will require fire administrators to utilize a slightly different complement of management tools. One of these tools is the citizen survey.

This study will examine the use of citizen surveys within the fire service and determine what value these surveys may have for fire administrators. A citizen survey for the residents of Lincolnwood, Illinois, will be developed and distributed to a sample of the community for review. When returned, the results will be tabulated.

Throughout the Advanced Leadership Issues of Emergency Management Services Course the concepts of customer service and quality control were studied and evaluated. Citizen surveys are another dimension of this quality control concept.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research was conducted through a literary search of the Learning Resource Center of the National Fire Academy. Relevant information in the form of books, magazines, and associated articles were reviewed to establish a clear understanding of the importance of citizen surveys and examine the use of such tools within the fire service. The purpose of this research is to review current literature written about using citizen input in evaluating existing services and determining future programs, and more specifically, to assist in developing a citizen survey to be used for the Lincolnwood Fire Department.

In light of the growing dissatisfaction with taxes and taxing bodies in general, and considering that competition from private sources is constantly growing, it makes good survival sense to find out if the fire service is giving our citizens what they want for services and programs. This vital information is obtained by listening to what our citizens are saying to us and about us. We must find out what the citizens want and determine if it's feasible or necessary to provide this service.

“While the fire service have the best intentions to provide the highest possible level of service, we should try and give the public what it wants, not what we think it ought to have. Input from citizens or taxpayers is beneficial” (Baldwin, 1989).

An article by Coleman (1990) stresses that to survive in a changing, competitive economy, the fire service must develop a marketing strategy. This includes getting their services accepted by the consuming public. The fire service is recognizing that they have customers, and their market extends beyond emergency services.

While the literature on quality has been predominantly goods-oriented, a few articles have focused on service quality. Listed below are a few service-oriented observations.

- “Service quality is more difficult for customers to evaluate than goods quality.
- Customers do not evaluate service quality solely on the outcome of a service: they also respond to the process of service delivery.

- The only criteria that count in evaluating service quality are defined by the customer. Only customers judge quality. All other judgments are essentially irrelevant” (Berry, 1990).

Three fundamental ways services differ from goods in terms of how they are produced, consumed, and evaluated.

1. “Services are basically intangible because they are performances and experiences rather than objects, precise manufacturing specifications concern uniform quality can rarely be set.
2. Services, especially those with a high labor content are heterogeneous: their performance often varies from producer to producer, from customer to customer, and from day to day.
3. Production and consumption of many services are inseparable. Quality in services often occurs during service delivery, usually in an interaction between the customer and the provider
“(Berry, 1990).

In Albrecht’s book, he writes:

When the product of an organization sells is that of a service, quality is measured in the customer’s reaction to the experience. This is significant as the organization is solely dependent of the customers mental and emotional state resulting from the experience. Ultimately, service is about feelings (Albrecht,1992).

One common mistakes in customer service is that customers are just numbers and do not represent a relationship. Cultivating personal caring relationships is the real secret to superior customer service. Customers need to believe that employees care personally about them and about helping them resolve their problems (McClendon, 1995). This can be a difficult challenge in the fire service since most of the time spent with citizens is of a very short duration and it is difficult for our employees to work on developing these relationships. As fire administrators, is it important to “have every employee understand that the public is the job, not an interruption to the job. Establish where customer satisfaction stands in relation to other priorities” Goldzimer, 1987).

One way to insure a relationship with the citizens of your community is to develop a relationship with them prior to them using your personnel during an emergency situation. One way of developing this relationship is involving the community in your decision making. This can be accomplished with the citizen survey.

The three traditional ways of conducting a citizen survey are the personal face-to-face interview, the telephone interview, and the mailed, self administered form. Simply mailing out a questionnaire is the easiest way to conduct a survey, but it may not be the best way to get people to respond. The telephone survey is currently popular where eligible respondents are likely to own phones. Personal interviews are always effective if one can find reliable interviewers and handle the cost (Streib, 1990).

Another technique being explored by some fire departments is to send a questionnaire to citizens who recently have been served by the fire department (Coleman, 1991). Another method of surveying is to place a questionnaire in community newsletters or utility bill mailings. Some fire departments develop a simple survey card and give it to teachers after every public education presentation, or to businesses after each inspection. In addition to valuable information, it can serve to motivate employees to take extra care (Albrecht, 1992).

The greatest obstacle is the commitment to actually use the research to improve services. Surveys should not be used to justify a direction you have already selected. Instead, they should be used to find out what the community and citizens want in programs and services (Buchan, 1994).

Customer service is the single most effective element of a marketing program. Local governments are making customer service a priority just as major businesses have been doing over the last twenty years. The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award is an annual award to recognize United States companies for excellence and quality achievement. In 1995, the Award Criteria examined seven categories including Customer Focus and Satisfaction. Of the 1000 total points awarded, 250 or one fourth of the total score was weighted toward this category.

Quality is judged by customers. All product and service characteristics that contribute value to customers and lead to customer satisfaction and preference must be a key focus of a company's management system. Value, satisfaction and preference may be

influenced by many factors throughout the customer's overall purchase, ownership, and service experience. These factors include the company's relationship with customers that build trust, confidence, and loyalty. This concept of quality includes not only the product and service characteristics that meet basic customer requirements, but it also includes those characteristics that enhance them and differentiate them from competing offerings. Such enhancements and differentiation may be based upon new offerings, combinations of products and service offerings, rapid response, or special relationships (Department of Commerce, 1995).

"The better we are at quality control the more likely we are to establish a higher level of competency in the public safety field. There is an old saying that when all is said and done, more is actually said than is ever done" (Coleman, 1991). As fire administrators, we can never let this saying become true of our organizations.

Unfortunately, the fire service have been slow to adopt survey research techniques. "There may be a lack of understanding of basic survey research methods, with a resulting overestimation of the time, skill and resources required to carry out a respectable survey effort" (Jones, 1985).

Despite this, the greatest strength of the citizen survey is that they have the potential to sample the viewpoints of all citizens. Fire administrators will also benefit their organizations by using information from the citizen survey to support a strategic decision making process. This process allows making a direct link between the assessment of public opinion and the development of a new public service or program. This is why I chose to develop a citizen survey for the Village of Lincolnwood.

PROCEDURES

Population

The Lincolnwood Fire Department serves a population of 12,000 people and covers approximately 2.5 square miles. Mostly residential in nature, Lincolnwood has a good base of manufacturing and commercial buildings anchored by a hundred store retail mall. Multi-family dwellings include luxury condominiums, town homes and some older duplexes. There is very little rental property in the Village.

The survey was distributed to 500 homes within the Village limits. A water bill mailing label list was obtained from the Finance Department. This list is comprised of four distinct sections that correlate with the water bill cycles. The mailings for the surveys were randomly picked but equally distributed among the four sections of the community. The surveys were mailed out on September 24, 1997, and instructions asked residents to return the surveys by October 11, 1997. The last survey was returned on October 14, 1997.

Instrumentation

A two page, seven question survey (Appendix A) was developed after reviewing the literature. The purpose of this survey was threefold. First, determine if the fire department does an effective job of communicating to the residents what existing services are available. Second, determine the satisfaction levels of the citizens with the services that are currently provided by the fire department and finally, determine what future programs the residents would like to see developed by the fire department.

The surveys were distributed by the US mail and included a postage paid return envelope and a cover letter. The citizens were instructed to complete the survey and return it to the fire Department. The surveys had no identifying marks to maintain confidentiality.

There were 500 surveys sent out and 223 were returned completed.

Collection of Data

All raw data returned by the respondents were compiled and tabulated. This information is listed in the "Results" section of this project report.

Assumptions and Limitations

It was assumed that all respondents would answer the survey honestly and to the best of their ability.

RESULTS

Of the five hundred surveys that were distributed, two hundred twenty-three (45.2%) surveys were returned and tabulated.

One purpose of this research project was to determine if the Lincolnwood Fire Department does an effective job of communicating to the residents what existing services are available to them. After reviewing the tabulations, the highest percentage of program recognition involved the smoke detector sales and installation program. One hundred twenty-two residents (57.8%) responded that they were aware of this program. Two other programs, the CPR and first aid classes as well as the fire survival house were recognized by 110 citizens (50%) and 107 citizens (49.8%) as services offered by the fire department. The lowest program recognition was the senior's spring luncheon at the fire department with only forty-eight (22.2%) respondents marking that they were aware of this program.

The second purpose of the survey was to determine the satisfaction levels of the citizens with the services that are currently provided by the fire department. Ninety respondents (39.8%) indicated they had reason to call the fire department in the last 5 years. The majority of these requests were for emergency medical services (51.2%) followed by "other reason" (30.1%) and fire suppression services (15.4%). "Other reason" responses are usually non-emergency in nature and involve smoke detector installations, smoke detector battery replacement, check on questionable operating appliances or some other "customer service" request.

When determining the satisfaction levels of the respondents who called on the fire department for service within the last 5 years, seventy-nine (87.8%) respondents rated their satisfaction level as "extremely satisfied" with the services while 9 respondents (10%) rated their satisfaction level as "very satisfied".

When rating the fire department on the overall quality of fire services provided, one hundred forty (84.8%) citizens responded “excellent”, seventeen (10.3%) responded “good” while 5 citizens (3%) rated the services as “acceptable”. Of those who responded they had reason to use the fire department services within the last 5 years, seventy-nine (90.8%) responded the services as “excellent” and 6 responded (6.9%) as “good” service.

The third area the survey addressed was determining what services the citizens want the fire department to consider implementing in the future. The highest citizens’ response (108 responses, (47.8%) showed a desire for the development of a home fire inspection program. A flu shot program was requested by 76 citizens (33.6%), while 46 citizens (20.4%) wanted a baby-sitters safety class and 34 citizens (15.0%) responded that a new mothers safety class was another service the fire department could provide.

Survey Totals

Surveys distributed	500	
Surveys returned	223	(45.2%)

Question 1 - Have you ever had reason to call the Lincolnwood Fire Department for service in the last 5 years?

YES: 90 (39.8%) **NO:** 136 (60.2%)

Question 2 - When you called for service from the Lincolnwood Fire Department, was it a request for:

Fire Suppression Services (Home or car fires, flooded basements, lockouts etc.)?

19 Responses 15.4%)

Emergency Medical Services (Ambulance service, invalid assists, well-being checks)?

63 Responses (51.2%)

Publication Education Services (CPR, first aid classes, block parties, fire drills)?

3 Responses (2.4%)

Fire Prevention Bureau (Fire inspections, plan reviews, hazard complaints)?

1 Response (.8%)

Other Reason (Smoke detector or battery installations, hazard information, etc.)?

37 Responses (30.1%)

Question 3 - Describe the level of satisfaction you felt from the services provided.

Extremely Satisfied	79 Responses	(87.8%)
Very Satisfied	9 Responses	(10.0%)
Satisfied	1 Response	(1.1%)
Dissatisfied	0 Response	
Very Dissatisfied	1 Response	(1.1%)

Question 4 - Are you aware that the Lincolnwood Fire Department offers the following services?

	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>
Blood pressure screening at the Fire Station	94 (42.3%)	128 (57.7%)
CPR and First Aid Classes	110 (50%)	110 (50%)

Smoke detector sales and installations	122 (57.8%)	89 (42.2%)
Fire Survival House at Lincolnwood Fest.	107 (49.8%)	108 (50.2%)
Senior's Spring Luncheon at the Fire Station	48 (22.2%)	168 (77.8%)
Block party apparatus & equipment demonstrations	66 (29.5%)	158 (70.5%)
Open House during Fire Prevention Week	122 (55.7%)	97 (44.3%)
Get well cards sent to patients	37 (18.5%)	163 (81.5%)
Do you have children in Lincolnwood schools?	40 (17.5%)	188 (82.5%)
Have your children ever told you about an Educational fire program that they participated in at their schools?	54 (45%)	66 (55%)

Question 5 - How would you rate the overall quality of fire services provided by the Lincolnwood Fire Department?

Excellent	140 Responses	(84.8%)
Good	17 Responses	(10.3%)
Acceptable	5 Responses	(3.0%)
Fair	1 Response	(.6%)
Poor	2 Responses	(1.2%)

Question 6 - What other services would you like to see the Lincolnwood Fire Department provide?

Flu Shot Program	76 Responses	(33.6%)
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Home Fire Inspection Program	108 Responses	(47.8%)
New Mothers Safety Class	34 Responses	(15.0%)
Baby-sitters Safety Class	46 Responses	(20.4%)
Other: Please describe:	5 Responses	(2.2%)
Carbon dioxide detectors sales & installations		
Help for widows		
Spanish class program for adults		
Day care for seniors		
Establish a senior center		

Question 7 - If you own or operate a business in Lincolnwood, how would you describe the level of satisfaction provided by our Fire prevention Bureau?

Extremely Satisfied	7 Responses	(63.6%)
Very Satisfied	2 Responses	(18.2%)
Satisfied	1 Response	(9.2%)
Dissatisfied	0 Responses	
Very Dissatisfied	1 Response	(9.2%)
Not Applicable	30 Responses	

DISCUSSION

Fire departments need regular feedback on the effectiveness of their operations to help them make improvements. This survey is an attempt to determine how well the fire department is serving the needs of Lincolnwood citizens. We need to evaluate the survey responses and utilize this evaluation as part of our strategic planning for the fire department.

When evaluating the level of satisfaction the citizens felt with the services that were provided by the department, it was reassuring to see that 97.8% of the citizens surveyed felt “extremely satisfied” or “very satisfied”. It was reassuring until you read *How Effective Are Your Community Service* written by The Urban Institute and the ICMA. They contend that citizen satisfaction surveys are necessary, “but they tend to reveal little since most citizens love their firefighters; anything short of top rating should be

taken as dire warnings here”. This tendency should be taken into consideration but continued monitoring of these satisfaction levels will ensure customer satisfaction.

When determining the fire department’s effectiveness of communicating to the residents what existing services are available to them, it was disappointing to evaluate some of the results. One of our oldest programs is our Get Well Card program. Citizens who are transported to the hospital by the ambulance receive a get well card signed by the paramedics who treated them. The department has received many thank you letters and donations because of this program, but only 18.5% of the citizens surveyed knew about the program.

Another disappointing survey result was the number of citizens who didn’t know the fire department sold or installed smoke detectors. Although the percentage seemed high, 57.8% of the residents were aware of the program, I thought the percentage would be much higher. Two years ago the fire department went door-to-door to every residence and offered a free smoke detector and installation, if the residence didn’t have one. Considering the exposure we created and the publicity generated with this program, I thought we would be closer to a ninety percent recognition factor. It did have the highest recognition factor of the programs surveyed. The fire department provides many services, but what seems needed is a greater degree of communication regarding these programs in order to better educate our customers.

The third area examined by the survey was determining what programs the citizens would like to see provided by the fire department. We will evaluate this information, determine the appropriateness of the suggestions, estimate the cost for any possible programs, and determine our capabilities in implementing potential new services.

The Westmont Fire Department (IL) conducted a similar survey. They sent out the survey within the village newsletter and hand-delivered them to businesses. They had a return response rate of 3.45%. Forty-three percent of the respondents had called the fire department for service in the last 5 years

compared to our 39.8%. High satisfaction marks were also noted in the Westmont survey with respondents indicating 95% “very satisfied” with their service. Fire Department program awareness levels by Westmont respondents ranged from 19% to 86% which was consider low in their conclusions (Mannion, 1997).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The fire chief is being challenged today with diminishing revenues and a rising public demand for cost-effective services. In evaluating our services, as well as the needs of the citizens of Lincolnwood, this survey offers some measurement of how the fire department is accomplishing the task of delivering our services to the citizens. Based on the survey’s results, I would recommend the following:

- Develop communication accesses with the citizens to educate them about existing programs that are currently in place. Some of these may include developing local access cable programs, newsletters to the citizens, and community networking with school PTA, Seniors Club, etc.
- Develop tools for continued monitoring of satisfaction levels of citizens with existing services. These tools could include course evaluations handed out at the completion of our programs, monthly sampling by phone or card of citizens or business owners who used our service during that month, and continued yearly surveys to measure results against the baseline survey.
- Develop business plans for the possible implementation of a community flu shot program and home inspection program. These two programs were the most often suggested by the citizens for implementation by our fire department.
- Continue to monitor the ideas of citizens for future projects through the use of citizen surveys. Evaluate the need and practicality of implementing future programs suggested by citizens.

Fire departments regularly track their expenditures and work activity. It is no less important that fire departments track the quality of service the citizens are getting for that effort.

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APPENDIX A

SURVEY

Lincolnwood Fire Department

Customer Service Quality Assessment Survey

September 1997

1. Have you ever had reason to call the Lincolnwood Fire Department for service in the last 5 years? YES NO

2. When you called for service from the Lincolnwood Fire Department, was it a request for:
 - A. Fire Suppression Services (Home or car fires, flooded basements, lockouts etc.)?
 - B. Emergency Medical Services (Ambulance service, invalid assists, well-being checks)?
 - C. Publication Education Services (CPR, first aid classes, block parties, fire drills)?
 - D. Fire Prevention Bureau (Fire inspections, plan reviews, hazard complaints)?
 - E. Other Reason (Smoke detector or battery installations, hazard information, etc.)?

If your response was "Other Reason" please briefly describe the services requested.

3. Describe the level of satisfaction you felt from the services provided.
 - A. Extremely Satisfied
 - B. Very Satisfied
 - C. Satisfied
 - D. Dissatisfied
 - E. Very Dissatisfied

If you were dissatisfied with the level of service provided, please explain.

4. Are you aware that the Lincolnwood Fire Department offers the following services?

A.	Blood pressure screening at the Fire Station	YES	NO
B.	CPR and First Aid Classes	YES	NO
C.	Smoke detector sales and installations	YES	NO
D.	Fire Survival House at Lincolnwood Fest.	YES	NO

E.	Senior's Spring Luncheon at the Fire Station	YES	NO
F.	Block party apparatus & equipment demonstrations	YES	NO
G.	Open House during Fire Prevention Week	YES	NO
H.	Get well cards sent to patients	YES	NO
I.	Do you have children in Lincolnwood schools?	YES	NO
J.	Have your children ever told you about an Educational fire program that they participated in at their schools?	YES	NO

5. How would you rate the overall quality of fire services provided by the Lincolnwood Fire Department?

- A. Excellent
- B. Good
- C. Acceptable
- D. Fair
- E. Poor

6. What other services would you like to see the Lincolnwood Fire Department provide?

- A. Flu Shot Program
- B. Home Fire Inspection Program
- C. New Mothers Safety Class
- D. Baby-sitters Safety Class
- E. Other: Please describe:

7. If you own or operate a business in Lincolnwood, how would you describe the level of satisfaction provided by our Fire prevention Bureau?

- A. Extremely Satisfied
- B. Very Satisfied
- C. Satisfied
- D. Dissatisfied
- E. Very Dissatisfied
- F. Not Applicable

If your response was "Dissatisfied" or "Very Dissatisfied", briefly explain why.

Thank you for your assistance.